

# Sometime Around Midnight

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There are a great many things that Satsuki could wish for, but the sort of things she would wish for are not at all likely to come true. Or so she thinks.

Status: complete

Published: 2016-02-17

Words: 3844

Rated: Fiction K+ - Language: English - Characters: Ryuko M., Satsuki K. -  
Reviews: 5 - Favs: 29 - Follows: 6

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11794968/1/Sometime-Around-Midnight>

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## Sometime Around Midnight

They're slightly drunk and February weighs upon them like a mantle of snow trimmed with a thousand plumes of visible breaths. They laugh and pretend they're dragons, taking in great, big lungfuls of crisp air and expelling clouds of mist that smell vaguely of cheap beer and shochu. It's almost as if the past thirteen years hadn't happened and the night whisked them away to some night in the middle of their childhoods, a night where they crept out of their windows without their parents knowing, without even the most innocent of mischief planned. Satsuki sees it perfectly. Two kids, one freshly eleven and the other still a month off from ten, chasing one another from streetlight to shadow, around benches and planters, faces pink with the childhood they deserved instead of the drinks they had.

But Satsuki is nineteen and overwhelmed.

Ryuko is almost eighteen and might be oblivious.

Things haven't been that simple for them in a long time. Possibly might never be that simple. If there's anything Satsuki has learned since Honnouji sunk into the bay, it's that the past can't be shaken purely by resolve or an off-the-cuff speech, as much as she wished it were so. You can't shake something that made you, not without building something else, something better to replace it.

It's why they both look at the stars peeking through the clouds.

Well, Ryuko looks up. Satsuki spins idly on a bar at the playground trying not to follow her gaze.

"When you blew out your candles, what did you wish for anyway?" Ryuko says, her hand still over her heart where a certain eye used to rest. The swing set's chains shriek as she gets to her feet.

She stops spinning, intending to end up sitting gracefully on the bar, but instead ending up upside down and staring at Ryuko's knees. "Aren't there rules about telling?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. I guess it's either to preserve the magic of wishes or to let parents be spared the guilt if they can't grant the wish. Or if you voice it, it might feel like a stupid wish so you might not make it happen yourself if you tell." She sits back on her hands in the shallow snow in front of Satsuki, legs splayed out as if to catch her if she fell. They're eye to eye now which is a sight-ha!-better than eye to knee. "I don't think you fall under any of those categories."

"Oh so logical when you've had a few, hm?" she says.

"I can be, yeah."

"It suits you well."

Ryuko goes her splotchy pink-high in the cheeks and in her ears-and looks away. "Yeah, well, you gonna tell me or do I hafta embarrass both of us by guessing?"

"Now I'm very curious as to what you think I might wish for. Guess three times, yes?"

Ryuko groans and lays back in the snow, covering her face with her hands. "Damn me and my stupid mouth."

Oh, but Satsuki loves that stupid mouth. It says things that her friends might not, both good and bad, unique to Ryuko and Ryuko alone. The words of her sister mean the world to her, no matter if they were poorly thought out, or if they hurt her, or if they happened to be the absolute last thing Satsuki needed or wanted to hear. Just the fact that they came from her is a miracle that she will never tire of. Absence does make the heart grow fonder, after all.

"Guess," she commands, growing steadily lightheaded from the combined antics of the shochu and the blood pooling in her head.

"Ugh, fine," Ryuko said. She stares up at the stars for a minute. "You wished for a bunker full of all the best teas in the world?"

"Why would I waste a wish on something that is so easily attainable with my obscene wealth?" she asks, as a giggle-that would have been a chuckle if she were more sober-burst out of her unbidden. "What's more, I already have a stocked pantry. A whole bunker would be... obscene."

"You want obscene?" Her hands leisurely moved through the rudest gestures at her command. They were surprisingly multicultural, actually, though she wasn't entirely sure that she knew what all of them meant. Satsuki didn't, and some she had doubts about their supposed obscenity.

"Stop, stop," she said, beckoning her closer so she could bat at her face. Only the proper disciplinary measures would work on Ryuko, if only she would come to her. "My purity can't handle such implied raunchiness."

"Didn't you fight me a bunch of times with your tits and ass hangin' out?"

"My intentions were pure."

"Hmph, I guess..."

Having enough of this new perspective, Satsuki righted herself on the bar and dismounted with a soft grunt, her wrists screaming at her in the cold. Mako's dad had said that neither them or her shoulders might never be completely ache free... She puts that out of her mind and sits next to Ryuko, leaning her head against the playground equipment.

"Guess again," Satsuki says.

"You wished.... You wished for socks."

She smirks, for once immediately understanding the reference. "Hey, do I look like an old wizard?"

"You both ran schools and you both had weird ways of running them. Oh, and ya did try to mold me to your own uses."

"He did... really? I don't believe I've gotten that far in the series yet."

Ryuko pats her shoulder. "You're better than him. I think. I definitely like you more than him anyway. And you apologized n stuff. Can't remember if he did or not..."

"I'm glad you like me."

"Yeah, well..." The blush in her cheeks had only just begun to dwindle when a second wave hit her more evenly. Satsuki swears she might have glowed pink in the starlight. "So not socks?"

"Not socks. I have a drawer full of them. I could wear a different pair every day and not have to wash them for about four months."

"Then you wished for none other than world peace!"

She shakes her head, her body shifting to lean against her instead. "That's unobtainable."

"Eh?"

"There's so many different ways of thinking and beliefs... even if most people agreed on a general creed, there would be people who do not share it, or who think it should be enforced in a different way, or who simply wish to hurt others for their own gain and entertainment. Peace is fleeting. That isn't to say we shouldn't strive for it... but I wouldn't wish for world peace."

"But if you wish for it, it has to be possible."

"There is a price for a wish like that, Ryuko, and I'm not sure it's worth it. I know the price of forced compliance."

Ryuko absentmindedly toys with her fingers in her lap then, her mood suddenly less bubbly. "Then what did you wish for?"

Satsuki doesn't have the will to answer right away. After all this time, the wish she made is just as far from reality as world peace, perhaps even more so. And at least world peace sought the betterment of the entire world, if it was simplistic and potentially naïve. Hers was entirely selfish, myopic even. She could have wished for her remaining negotiations to go smoothly so that the employees and communities of the companies she was freeing from the corporation's hold would benefit the most. She could have wished for the health and success of all the former residents of Honnouji, which she believes is possible for all of them in various ways. Even remaining on the scale of selfishness, she could have wished for an opportunity to live with her sister. She could have wished for many things aside from the one she chose. Now she would only look like a fool.

"Please, don't laugh," she says. Her voice is quieter than she means it to be.

"I won't." Ryuko's voice is serious, and though her head is tilted back to once again look at the stars and her own position leveled her gaze at their snow crusted shoes, she knows that her brow would have that particular crease that appears only when she is dead serious about something. Those months of fighting her acquainted her rather intimately with that crease. Their father had it too. That or time made her imagine that he did.

"It's such a foolish thing to wish."

"It's alright to be foolish, sis."

Satsuki finds her throat tightening around the words before they're even given a concrete shape. Shame blooms hotly in her chest and only makes it harder to force the air in her lungs to give the words life, but much like everything in her life up to that point, she makes it happen.

"I wished that I could know what Dad thought of me."

She feels Ryuko's head shift against hers, but nothing is spoken.

"He couldn't have meant for me to do the things I did when he told me," she continues. "What I've done to countless people through the system I enforced and with my very hands is reprehensible, absolutely disgusting... He wouldn't be proud to know that I killed someone to prove myself to Ragyo when I was ten. *Ten*. A monster so young couldn't possibly be what he wanted me to become to resist her and the life fibers." Her face feels blistering hot now, suddenly, now that the words come by themselves. Not with the fervor she might have expected, but almost dull. An edge worn dull without attention. "And that I became so wrapped up in my role as Student Council President is the height of my monstrosity. You saw it yourself. Hundreds of students and their family members fell to feed my reign and that's without even considering the casualties of my conquering force. All for what? My secret rebellion that... that was... You did more for the rebellion in a handful of months than I managed to do in thirteen years... every time all of this crosses my mind I wonder what he thought of me. If he saw this in me then and decided to leave me behind with her so-"

She feels a hand plant itself in the center of her back and all the words that were meant to follow next flee, startled by the sudden touch. It takes a few seconds to remind herself that the only one who could be touching her so boldly is Ryuko, for the other dreaded one is dead in the emptiness of space and the final buried in a mountain of trap-free cheeses and sweet liqueurs. The thought takes root quickly, sapping out the tenseness that had gripped her shoulders and leaving her feeling wilted. How foolish can she be in one night?

"I get what your sayin', sis," Ryuko says. She rubs her back. It's awkward, like she's never comforted anyone before, but Satsuki wouldn't be surprised if her life never allowed for it. They were kindred spirits like that. "I don't really know what he thought of me either. After it all ended it dawned on me that I still didn't know if I was a tool or a daughter to him."



"He must have loved you," Satsuki says. "He saved you from her as long as he could."

"Or he was keeping a powerful weapon from her. He shipped me off to boarding school the minute he could and barely kept any contact while I was there."

This is the first time they've ever talked about him outside the realms of pure grief and it became clear that Satsuki had made several misguided assumptions about their relationship. She had assumed that they were relatively close, especially given how hard and how angrily she fought for him. But regardless of how he felt about her, she did love him. That she could bet her life on. She wraps an arm around Ryuko's waist.

"You deserved better than that," she says.

"So did you."

Satsuki shakes her head.

"Don't pull that shit with me, sis. If he'd taken you too, you wouldn't have done all those terrible things and I wouldn't have tried to kick your ass to the moon."

"I could have come up with a different plan."

"Oh yeah, there's soooo many plans that coulda done the trick of both trying to save the world and making sure that bitch trusted you enough... because that's why you did all that right? To make sure she trusted you enough to keep you in on the whole plan?"

"Yes, but-"

"But what? What else could you do?"

"... die?"

"Don't be an idiot! If you died before any of that, how would I know you?"

Satsuki's breath caught in her throat as she sat up to look at her. The crease became a deep gouge between Ryuko's eyebrows. "That's selfish, Ryuko."

"Who cares? We didn't ask to be born or experimented on or separated. That was all on our stupid fucking parents. Honestly, if I had to choose who I wanted alive, you or dad, it'd be you, no question. And don't you go sayin' shit like 'I'm not worth that' or whatever, because your worth to me is mine to decide, got it?"

Satsuki nods numbly. "Got it."

"Besides, if dad somehow was alive after all this shit? He doesn't deserve us. He didn't visit ya when you were healing from the Month of Hell. He didn't come back to explain anything to me. He hasn't been here at all, so he can just go ahead and be dead." Ryuko sighs, her chest buckling with the sheer size of it. She almost looks as if she regrets saying that aloud, but her brow yields nothing. "I won't tell ya that his opinion shouldn't mean anything to ya though."

"It shouldn't. It's in the past, and he's gone."

"It obviously does mean something though."

"Yes..."

The hand on her back stilled, only for her to drape her arm around her shoulders. Satsuki has never wanted to melt into an embrace more than at that moment, but she can't remember the last time when she allowed herself to, or even the last time someone decided to try and comfort her like this. There are memories, but lately she's not so sure if her memories of a life before are real or desperate dreams clinging to her brain like cat hair on black slacks. So she rests her head on Ryuko's shoulder again and tightens her grip around her waist.

"If it helps, I wouldn'ta left you behind, sis," Ryuko says. Her breath still reeks of beer, but it's actually a comforting smell. "If I'da known about you, I woulda harassed him all day every day."

"Ryuko..." her voice wavers.

"I'm proud to have ya as my sister, Satsuki, even if you've done shitty things. I'm glad we're gonna finally make up for lost time together."

"I'm proud of you too, Ryuko," she says. A tremor tries to work its way into her voice, trailing in with the tears pricking at her eyes. "You're a better sister than I could ever dream up."

Ryuko looks surprised to hear her say that, as if it were a secret she knew of and suspected that it would follow her to the grave, unspoken. "Yeah?"

Satsuki nods vehemently. "And I've dreamt of a great many sisters, just so you know."

"That's, uh, there's a lot of expectations in there..."

"No, no, just live. Living is the only expectation that I have of you."

"I think I can do that. Look, I'm even idiot-proof!" She twirls her red streak around her finger, seemingly proud now of her functional immortality. Lately, she hasn't gotten much use out of it, which suited both of them just fine after the bona fide gore fest the last battle turned out to be. Then, her eyes widen. "Oh, hey, that reminds me of something I've been wanting to ask you."

"Hm?"

"So I'm graduating high school soon, as you know."

"One of many reasons I'm proud of you." She sniffles and curses the cold and other things.

"It's just high school, you big nerd. But anyway I've been wondering if you wanna get an apartment together somewhere in the city. Uh, with me. Like us livin' together for a while."

She feels a rush of joy, but worry crushes it swiftly.

"Did something happen with Mako and her family? They're not kicking you out, are they? Do you need a medi-?"

Ryuko holds up her hands. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Nothing's happened with me and them at all. They're being really supportive of this since I pitched the idea at them, to tell the truth, though they were real big on reminding me that I've always got a place with them if you say no or if it doesn't work out."

"That's good. They're good for you," she says.

"Yeah, they are." Ryuko smiles fondly. Her love for that family is almost too much to bear witness to sometimes, since Satsuki hasn't been inoculated against the debilitating effects of sweetness for a long time now. "But you and me have our whole lives to catch up on... it'd be easy if we were under the same roof, if you're likin' the idea."

For the first time that night, Satsuki looks up at the stars, only to find that the clouds have swallowed them whole once again, leaving them with a low ceiling tinted faintly with light pollution. This certainly isn't the wish that crossed her mind before the candles, that much is true, but it had been in her heart unspoken since she first felt it stirring there after she caught her out of the air. Ryuko's dedication to Mako and her family seemed insurmountable, however, and she had never dared to broach or entertain the subject except on sleepless nights at the mansion. It's another miracle that Ryuko came up with it herself, and yet another that the Mankanshokus are supportive of it... did she really deserve this kind of luck or kindness?

"I-it's cool if you don't like the idea, I mean, it was just a thought, y'kn-" Ryuko starts, looking away.

"No! I do like the idea. I like it very much," she says. "I'm sorry, I was just thinking about how lucky I am that you asked."

"O-oh?"

"Yes, I didn't think you'd want to, so I thought it would be presumptuous to ask simply because we share our blood."

"What?! You wanted to? What made you think I wouldn't wanna?" She pinches at Satsuki's cheek, caught firmly between her thumb and the knuckle of her index finger in chastisement.

"You seemed happy and content where you were?" Her shrug is lost amid the press of Ryuko's arm and chest. "Also I don't think I could have won if Mako pouted at you. She can be more persuasive than I am, especially since I had only been an enemy to you for most of the time we knew each other back then."

"Yeah, I guess that's true and all," she says and releases her cheek. "But still you shoulda asked. I thought for a while that you didn't want me around or somethin'."

"I do very much want you around, Ryuko."

"We need to start talkin' to each other about our feelings and shit, sis. Coulda saved us a lotta grief."

Satsuki nods. "Are either of us very good at it?"

Ryuko gestures between them with an incredulous look on her face. "Here we are, doing it anyway."

"That is true as well."

"So..." Ryuko says. She fidgets in the snow until she's sitting on her knees and facing her, making sure to blast her with the full power of

her earnest face. It melts her thoroughly.

"So us living together is a yes then?"

"Oh, yes. A million yeses. I'm fully on board with this proposal."

Ryuko pumps a fist in the air, launching herself to her feet shortly after. Before she could react, she pulls her to her feet as well as easily as if Satsuki were a rag doll. The jerk hurts her shoulders, but her grip on her hands ease to simple firmness as she sends them spinning into the open white of the playground. Her heart fully succumbs to Ryuko's infectious joy as the nightscape blends into a rush of greys and whites and near blacks peppered with the orange and yellow smears of people yet awake in the neighborhood around them. In the center of it all, Ryuko in sharp relief as shadows cast by the streetlight nearby ebbs and flows along her features, a hyperactive tide that couldn't obscure the weightlessness of her very being. This is what Satsuki is truly meant to do; she is meant to make her smile like this as much as she possibly can, to love and protect her as best as any sister could.

They lose control, dizziness hitting them hard and fast until they're back in the snow and wheezing.

"This is the best outcome I coulda hoped for," Ryuko manages to say between gasps and her face-splitting grin. "Thanks, sis."

"I know this is by far the best birthday I've had, and the best gift to go with it. Thank you, Ryuko, for the being the bravest of the two of us. God only knows how long it would have taken me to get up the nerve."

"Aw, is sis getting soft?"

"Parts of me are getting there, I think."

"Good thing I'm gonna be around to tenderize ya, then. We'll have our very own Softsuki someday."

"Oh, you wish."

"My birthday *is* coming up you know."

Satsuki groans. "Can't I just buy your love like every other rich family does?"

"Oh, yeah sure, but you have to earn it right too," she says with a laugh.

"Figures. Luckily, I don't mind honest work." Satsuki climbs to her feet, cursing her height under her breath before offering a hand to Ryuko. "We should get back before the others start to worry."

"Yeah, our talk sobered me up too much. Uzu better not have drank all the Kirin..."

"He's an Asahi man. He just drinks yours to goad you into a fight."

"He might just well get one."

"Come on."

She guides her out of the playground, which looks a good deal worn out after their visit. A fleck of cold blooms on her cheek and another on the back of her hand, promising to smooth out the traces of them from the playground enough that children would destroy the remains come morning without knowing anything had happened there while they were gone. She blows another wisp of breath in Ryuko's direction and she answers back with one of her own.

Ryuko is almost eighteen and lighter than air.

Satsuki is nineteen and her real wish came true.